

## VENTURA COUNTY LIBRARY SERVICES AGENCY

### INTRODUCTION

The Ventura County Library Services Agency (VCLSA) is a dependent agency organized in 1916 to provide free public library services to all areas of the county except the Santa Paula Library District and the city of Oxnard which already had their own libraries. In 1980 the city of Thousand Oaks withdrew and formed its own library agency. All county libraries are funded by property taxes.

The sixteen county branches of VCLSA have suffered since the state took away over half of the \$10 million funding in 1993, following adjustments made due to Proposition 13. Over the past four years, the county has subsidized VCLSA by more than \$2 million, but it can no longer afford that level of contribution.

Lack of adequate funding has resulted in fewer hours of operation, reduced staffing, inadequate, outdated book collections, and little or no new equipment. The continued wear and tear on facilities and existing collections as well as a loss of professional staff, has caused the agency to slip further behind each year.

The Board of Supervisors has considered several possible solutions to the agency's predicament, including alliances with cities and schools, state grants and special taxes. For example, in June 1996, the Board hired a consultant to conduct a telephone survey asking residents whether they would support an annual library tax. Based on a positive response in July, the Board approved setting up a benefit assessment district which could obtain \$33 per home per year in areas served by VCLSA. This would create a tax district without an election, but required approval by city councils and could be canceled by a 50% protest by those who would be taxed. Later that month, in spite of possible court challenges, the Board voted to initiate plans for the special tax district, a process that takes at least five months. The County Counsel advised the Board that if voters approved Proposition 218 local governments would have to win two-thirds voter approval to impose the assessment.

The Grand Jury monitored the actions being taken by county and city officials to resolve organizational and funding problems of VCLSA.

### INQUIRY

The Grand Jury accomplished its task as follows:

- Reviewed past Grand Jury final reports on library studies
- Interviewed the VCLSA Director (now retired) and the recently appointed interim administrator
- Reviewed consultant reports for the county and the cities of Ventura and Simi Valley
- Attended meetings of the city of Ventura library steering committee
- Reviewed proposals made by the Board of Supervisors
- Attended meetings of the Library Implementation Committee

## FINDINGS

- Consulted with budget analyst in County Administrator's Office
- Reviewed government and education codes
- Monitored Board of Supervisors' meetings on library actions.
- Concurrent with a county study, which is addressed later in this section, two cities, Ventura and Simi Valley, hired consultants to help them decide whether it would be feasible to run their own libraries.
- The Ventura consultant concluded that the city could save money and provide the same level of service by withdrawing from VCLSA. It was recommended that the Foster and the Wright Libraries be combined into one central facility, keeping the Avenue Library branch for the west side of the city.
- In June 1996 Ventura spent \$100,000 to keep the Avenue branch open. Later the city set up an additional fund to supplement county funds. In November 1996 the city council approved \$65,000 of that supplement to buy more books and materials for the Foster and Wright Libraries. This was in addition to allocations from the county budget of \$25,500 for books.
- A problem exists regarding the Foster Library building which is owned by the county and contains the county's reference library. If the City of Ventura should leave VCLSA, the Foster Library cannot keep these materials.
- Simi Valley commissioned an independent study in September 1996. The consultant concluded that Simi Valley could do a better job with local control of its library. Although the curtailed hours were unpopular with patrons, the service was praised. The study was unclear about the impact on the county system if Simi Valley left the system since the decisions made by the city council to contract with county for some services would be a determining factor.
- Other county branches have had mixed success in keeping their libraries open and maintained. Ojai voters approved a parcel tax with 69% support, which assesses property owners \$35 per year and apartment renters \$25 per year. Ojai's library is now open seven days each week, most nights until 8 p.m., has three full time employees, and has reserved about \$40,000 for new books. In addition, library boosters have funded a link to a local school and set up homework centers for students. Camarillo, Piru, and unincorporated areas, on the other hand, failed to pass similar measures with the necessary  $\frac{2}{3}$  majority.
- Oak Park and Piru are the only two libraries in joint use with schools in the county. Oak Park High School shares a library with the public. The Piru library is located in an elementary school. Passage of Proposition 203 in March 1997, provides for state funding for school facilities construction including joint use projects. By applying for a 60/40 grant, money can be used for a library building on the Oak Park Campus.
- In August 1996 the county hired a consulting firm to find ways to cut costs and increase efficiency in VCLSA. The consultants presented their initial evaluation of the agency in October 1996. Their findings were based on visits to all sixteen branches and revealed basic inequalities among communities, often because of

private donations. The consultant criticized the agency for using half of the 67 full time employees in administration, leaving the other half for front line work with patrons.

- The consultant's final report was presented to the Ventura County Council of Governments in December 1996. Some of the recommendations were to:
  1. Divide the county into service districts and allow each city to operate its own branch using property tax revenues
  2. Develop a Joint Powers Agency (JPA) with the seven cities to govern central services
  3. Restructure the agency from top to bottom, bringing more staff out of administration to put in branches and expand hours
  4. Contract out more services
  5. Put  $\frac{1}{8}$  cent sales tax increase measure on ballot to generate about \$8 million revenue for libraries
  6. If sales tax election fails, put parcel tax proposal on ballot
  7. Relocate library management to offices in the Government Center to save money and centralize administration
  8. Establish a private library foundation for supplemental funding
  9. Provide joint purchasing and accounting services.
- After release of the consultant's report, in January 1997, the VCLSA management issued a detailed response. The response restructured staffing and significantly increased hours. In order to achieve these changes, homework centers, summer reading programs, adult literacy programs, and a select depository for state and federal documents were eliminated.
- In January 1997 the Board of Supervisors appointed the Library Implementation Committee as an informal policy making group. The Board pledged to empower the committee short of ceding final authority regarding library plans. The committee is composed of representatives from all seven cities served by VCLSA and two members of the Board of Supervisors. The remaining three cities have been asked to participate if they so choose.
- The first meeting was held in January 1997. Ventura, Simi Valley and Camarillo did not send representatives since they had decided to negotiate directly with the county. There was general agreement among those who did attend that all cities need to participate if agreement can be reached on the restructuring and financing of libraries.
- The committee chairman presented the Library Purchasing Partnership proposal for consideration. This proposal describes a consortium to purchase books, to provide training, to purchase materials in bulk, and to coordinate other agreed upon central services. Cities could contract for these services or perform them themselves
- At the committee's second meeting in February 1997, representatives from cities of Camarillo and Simi Valley attended. The Ventura representative did not attend but favors a proposal which the Simi Valley mayor presented, based

on a paper entitled "Library Vision for Ventura" prepared by the Ventura City Manager. Simi Valley agrees with the proposal to have individual cities run their own libraries. The Ventura plan called for a formula to distribute revenue to the cities. Each city would receive the property tax collected within city limits plus a per capita share of other library money ordinarily allocated to VCLSA. This proposal met with protest from the smaller cities who fear that their libraries would suffer. Camarillo, Fillmore, Moorpark, Ojai and Port Hueneme want to work together on a JPA or some other partnership.

- The committee decided to ask individual city managers and the County Administrative Officer to meet as a "technical committee" and report on the financial pros and cons of a Joint Powers Agency. At this writing, the technical committee continues to meet to develop a services district map which could be used to determine the base revenue needed to operate branch libraries in each of the districts. Discussions reportedly emphasize more local control by the cities. The technical committee will be reporting to the Implementation Committee with its recommendations.
- In order to cut some operating costs immediately, the business administration offices have been moved from rented facilities on Telegraph Road to the fourth floor of the Government Center Building, saving over \$5,000 per month rental.
- Utilizing ideas generated by the consultant, other reorganization is underway.
- Some of the central library management personnel are augmenting staffing requirements in branch libraries in order to increase the number of hours that libraries are open.
- Currently a major book and materials inventory is being conducted. Within the coming months the collection will be examined for outdated and worn materials and cataloguing will be completed.

## CONCLUSIONS

1. City and county administrators have worked diligently to remedy the problems of an ailing county library system. They are to be commended for searching for solutions, involving the public and city leaders in the process.
2. More work needs to be done to reorganize VCLSA and find more stable funding. The ideas presented by the consultants have been constructive and could assist the Board of Supervisors in making some hard decisions.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Continue to fully inform and involve the public about the progress being made to provide quality library services in order to restore public confidence.
2. Finalize VCLSA restructuring to maintain more staff on the "front line," expand library hours, and trim administrative staff.
3. Increase the library book budget in order to improve a substandard collection.
4. Develop and implement a central purchasing consortium.

5. Pursue measures to generate necessary revenues.
6. Appoint a Library Services Advisory Board or a Library Services Planning Commission.
7. Form a Library Foundation to generate additional funding.
8. Continue to pursue full funding of the Special District Augmentation Fund from the State.

**RESPONSE REQUIRED**

Board of Supervisors

County Administrative Officer

Library Services Agency